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Philosophy for Everyone

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Chapter 2

What is Knowledge? Do We Have Any?

Duncan Pritchard

Introduction

In this chapter we will be introducing you to an area of philosophy called the ‘theory of knowledge’, also known as **epistemology**. In particular, we will be exploring two philosophical questions which are fundamental to epistemology. The first question is: what is the nature of knowledge? What is that determines whether or not someone knows something? As we will see, this question is harder to answer than you might think. The second question is: do we have any knowledge? This second question concerns the philosophical problem of **radical scepticism**, which is the problem of demonstrating that we do have the knowledge we typically credit to ourselves. In its most extreme form, radical scepticism maintains that knowledge is simply impossible. As I hope to convince you, explaining just what is mistaken about radical scepticism is quite a challenge. We will take these two questions in turn, since we need to have a reasonable grip on what knowledge is before we can understand what it is the sceptic is claiming we don’t possess.

Propositional Knowledge versus Ability Knowledge

Think of all the things that you know, or at least think you know, right now. You know, for example, that the earth is round and that Paris is the capital of France. You know that you can speak (or at least read) English, and that two plus two is equal to four. You know, presumably, that all bachelors are unmarried men, that it is wrong to hurt people just for fun, that *The Godfather II* is a wonderful film, and that the moon is not made of cheese. And so on.

But what is it that all these cases of knowledge have in common? Think again of the examples just given, which include geographical, linguistic, mathematical, aesthetic, ethical, and scientific knowledge. Given these myriad types of knowledge, what, if anything, ties them all together?

In all the examples of knowledge just given, the type of knowledge in question is what is called **propositional knowledge**, in that it is knowledge of a **proposition**. A proposition is what is asserted by a sentence which says that something is the case—e.g., that the earth is flat, that bachelors are unmarried men, that two plus two is four, and so on. Propositional knowledge will be the focus of this section of the book, but we should also recognise from the outset that it is not the only sort of knowledge that we possess.

There is, for example, **ability knowledge**, or ‘know-how’. Ability knowledge is clearly different from propositional knowledge; I know how to swim, for example, but I do not thereby know a set of propositions about how to swim. Indeed, I’m not altogether sure that I could tell

you how to swim, but I do know how to swim nonetheless (and I could prove it by manifesting this ability—by jumping into a swimming pool and doing the breaststroke, say).

Ability knowledge is certainly an important type of knowledge to have. We want lots of know-how, such as to know how to ride a bicycle, to drive a car, or to operate a personal computer. Notice, however, that while only relatively sophisticated creatures like humans possess propositional knowledge, ability knowledge is far more common. An ant might plausibly be said to know how to navigate its terrain, but would we want to say that an ant has propositional knowledge; that there are facts which the ant knows? Could the ant know, for example, that the terrain it is presently crossing is someone's porch? Intuitively not, and this marks out the importance of propositional knowledge over other types of knowledge like ability knowledge, which is that such knowledge presupposes the sort of relatively sophisticated intellectual abilities possessed by (mature) humans.

Henceforth, when we talk about knowledge, we will have propositional knowledge in mind.

Knowledge, Truth and Belief

Two things that just about every epistemologist agrees on are that a prerequisite for possessing knowledge is that one has a belief in the relevant proposition, and that that belief must be true. So if you know that Paris is the capital of France, then you must believe that this is the case, and your belief must also be true.

Take the belief requirement first. It is sometimes the case that we explicitly *contrast* belief and knowledge, as when we say things like, 'I don't merely believe that he was innocent, I know it', which might on the face of it be thought to imply that knowledge does not require belief after all. If you think about these sorts of assertions in a little more detail, however, then it becomes clear that the contrast between belief and knowledge is being used here simply to emphasise the fact that one *not only* believes the proposition in question, but *also* knows it. In this way, these assertions actually lend support to the claim that knowledge requires belief, rather than undermining it.

In order to further assess the plausibility of the belief requirement for knowledge imagine for a moment that it didn't hold. This would mean that one could have knowledge of a proposition that one did not even believe. Suppose, for example, that someone claimed to have known a quiz answer, even though it was clear from that person's behaviour at the time that she didn't even believe the proposition in question (perhaps she put forward a different answer to the question, or no answer at all). Clearly we would not agree that this person did have knowledge in this case. The reason for this relates to the fact that to say that someone has knowledge is to credit that person with a certain kind of success. But for it to be *your* success, then belief in the proposition in question is essential, since otherwise this success is not creditable to you at all.

Next, consider the truth requirement. In particular, is it plausible to suppose that one could know a false proposition? Of course, we often *think* that we know something and then it turns out that we were wrong, but that's just to say that we didn't really know it in the first place. Could we genuinely know a false proposition? Could I know, for example, that the moon is made of cheese, even though it manifestly isn't? I take it that when we talk of someone having knowledge, we mean to exclude such a possibility. This is because to ascribe knowledge to someone is to credit that person with having got things right, and that means that what we regard that person as knowing had better not be false, but true.

Note that in saying that knowledge requires true belief we should be careful to be clear that we *not* thereby saying that knowledge requires infallibility, such that there is no possibility of one making a mistake in this regard. Presumably, you know what you had for breakfast this morning. The claim that knowledge requires true belief entails therefore that your belief about what you had for breakfast this morning is true. But a subject matter like what you had for breakfast this morning is certainly the kind of thing that one could be in error about. That knowledge requires true belief just means that you are not in fact in error in this case; it does not

mean that you couldn't have possibly been in error (i.e., if things had been different, such as if someone had tricked you by switching your breakfast cereals around, say).

Knowledge versus Mere True Belief

It is often noted that belief *aims* at the truth, in the sense that when we believe a proposition, we believe it to be the case (i.e., to be true). When what we believe is true, then there is a match between what we think is the case and what is the case. We have got things right. If mere true belief suffices for 'getting things right', however, then one might wonder as to why epistemologists do not end their quest for an account of knowledge right there and simply hold that knowledge is nothing more than true belief (i.e., 'getting things right').

There is in fact a very good reason why epistemologists do not rest content with mere true belief as an account of knowledge, and that is that one can gain true belief entirely by *accident*, in which case it would be of no credit to you at all that you got things right. Consider Harry, who forms his belief that the horse Lucky Lass will win the next race purely on the basis of the fact that the name of the horse appeals to him. Clearly this is not a good basis on which to form one's belief about the winner of the next horse race, since whether or not a horse's name appeals to you has no bearing on its performance.

Suppose, however, that Harry's belief turns out to be true, in that Lucky Lass *does* win the next race. Is this knowledge? Intuitively not, since it is just a matter of *luck* that his belief was true in this case. Remember that knowledge involves a kind of success that is creditable to the agent. Crucially, however, successes that are merely down to luck are never credited to the agent. In order to emphasise this point, think for a moment about successes in another realm, such as archery. Notice that if one genuinely is a skilled archer, then if one tries to hit the bull's-eye, and the conditions are right (e.g., the wind is not gusting), then one usually *will* hit the bull's-eye. That's just what it means to be a skilled archer. The word 'usually' is important here, since someone who isn't a skilled archer might, as it happens, hit the bull's eye on a particular occasion, but she wouldn't *usually* hit the bull's-eye in these conditions. Perhaps, for example, she aims her arrow and, by luck, it hits the centre of the target. Does the mere fact that she is successful on this one occasion mean that she is a skilled archer? No, and the reason is that she would not be able to repeat this success. If she tried again, for example, her arrow would in all likelihood sail off into the heavens.

Having knowledge is just like this. Imagine that one's belief is an arrow, which is aimed at the centre of the target, truth. Hitting the bull's-eye and forming a true belief suffices for getting things right, since all this means is that one was successful on that occasion. It does not suffice, however, for having knowledge any more than hitting the bull's-eye purely by chance indicates that you are skilled in archery. To have knowledge, one's success must genuinely be the result of one's efforts, rather than merely being by chance. Only then is that success creditable to one. And this means that forming one's belief in the way that one does ought usually, in those circumstances, to lead to a true belief.

Harry, who forms his true belief that Lucky Lass will win the race simply because he likes the name, is like the person who happens to hit the bull's-eye, but who is not a skilled archer. Usually, forming one's belief about whether a horse will win a race simply by considering whether the name of the horse appeals to you will lead you to form a false belief.

Contrast Harry with someone who genuinely knows that Lucky Lass will win the race. Perhaps, for example, this person is a 'Mr Big', a gangster who has fixed the race by drugging the other animals so that his horse, Lucky Lass, will win. He knows that the race will be won by Lucky Lass because the way he has formed his belief, by basing it on the special grounds he has for thinking that Lucky Lass cannot lose, would normally lead him to have a true belief. It is not a matter of luck that Mr Big hits the target of truth.

The challenge for epistemologists is thus to explain what needs to be added to mere true belief in order to get knowledge. In particular, epistemologists need to explain what needs to be

added to true belief to capture this idea that knowledge, unlike mere true belief, involves a success that is creditable to the agent, where this means, for example, that the agent's true belief was not simply a matter of luck.

The Classical Account of Knowledge

So it seems that there must be more to knowledge than just true belief. But what could this additional component be? The natural answer to this question, one that is often ascribed to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427-c. 347 BC), is that what is needed is a *justification* for one's belief, where this is understood as being in possession of good reasons for thinking that what one believes is true. This proposal is known as the **classical account of knowledge**. (It also sometimes referred to as the 'tripartite'—i.e., three-part—account of knowledge).

Consider again the case of Harry, who believes that Lucky Lass will win the race because he likes the name, and Mr. Big, who forms the same belief on the grounds that he has fixed the race. As we noted, although both of these agents believe truly, only Mr. Big intuitively has knowledge of what he believes. The claim that it is justification that marks the difference between knowledge and mere true belief accords with this assessment of our two agents' beliefs. Mr. Big, after all, has excellent reasons in support of his true belief, since he is aware that the other horses have been drugged and so don't have a hope of winning (unlike the undrugged Lucky Lass). Harry, in contrast, can't offer any good reasons in support of his belief. That he happens to like the name of a horse is hardly a good reason for thinking that this horse will win a race!

Plausibly, then, the missing ingredient in our account of knowledge is justification, such that knowledge is justified true belief. Indeed, until relatively recently most epistemologists thought that this theory of knowledge was correct. Unfortunately, as we will now see, the classical account of knowledge cannot be right, even despite its surface plausibility.

The Gettier Problem

The person who demonstrated that the classical account of knowledge is untenable was a philosopher named Edmund Gettier (b. 1927). In a very short article—just two-and-a-half pages in length—he offered a devastating set of counterexamples to the classical account: what are now known as **Gettier cases**. In essence, what Gettier showed was that you could have a justified true belief and yet still lack knowledge of what you believe because your true belief was ultimately gained via luck in much the same way as Harry's belief was gained by luck.

We will use a different example from the ones cited by Gettier, though one that has the same general structure. Imagine a man, let's call him John, who comes downstairs one morning and sees that the time on the grandfather clock in the hall says '8.20'. On this basis John comes to believe that it is 8.20 a.m., and this belief is true, since it *is* 8.20 a.m. Moreover, John's belief is justified in that it is based on excellent grounds. For example, John usually comes downstairs in the morning about this time, so he knows that the time is about right. Moreover, this clock has been very reliable at telling the time for many years and John has no reason to think that it is faulty now. He thus has good reasons for thinking that the time on the clock is correct.

Suppose, however, that the clock had, unbeknownst to him, stopped 24 hours earlier, so that John is now forming his justified true belief by looking at a stopped clock. Intuitively, if this were so then John would lack knowledge even though he has met the conditions laid down by the classical account of knowledge. After all, that John has a true belief in this case is, ultimately, a matter of luck, just like Harry's belief that Lucky Lass would win the 4.20 at Kempton.

If John had come downstairs a moment earlier or a moment later—or if the clock had stopped at a slightly different time—then he would have formed a false belief about the time by looking at this clock. Thus we can conclude that knowledge is not simply justified true belief.

There is a general form to all Gettier cases, and once we know this we can use it to construct an unlimited number of them. To begin with, we need to note that you can have a justified false belief, since this is crucial to the Gettier cases. For example, suppose you formed a false belief by looking at a clock that you had no reason for thinking wasn't working properly but which was, in fact, and unbeknownst to you, not working properly. This belief would clearly be justified, even though it is false. With this point in mind, there are three stages to constructing your own Gettier case.

First, you take an agent who forms her belief in a way that would usually lead her to have a false belief. In the example above, we took the case of someone looking at a stopped clock in order to find out the time. Clearly, using a stopped clock to find out the time would usually result in a false belief.

Second, you add some detail to the example to ensure that the agent's belief is justified nonetheless. In the example above, the detail we added was that the agent had no reason for thinking that the clock wasn't working properly (the clock is normally reliable, is showing what appears to be the right time, and so on), thus ensuring that her belief is entirely justified.

Finally, you make the case such that while the way in which the agent formed her belief would normally have resulted in a justified false belief, in this case it so happened that the belief was true. In the stopped clock case, stipulating that the stopped clock just happens to be 'telling' the right time does this.

Putting all this together, we can construct an entirely new Gettier case from scratch. As an example of someone forming a belief in a way that would normally result in a false belief, let's take someone who forms her belief that Madonna is across the street by looking at a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Madonna which is advertising her forthcoming tour, and which is posted just across the street. Forming one's belief about whether someone is across the street by looking at a life-sized cut-out of that person would not normally result in a true belief. Next, we add some detail to the example to ensure that the belief is justified. In this case we can just stipulate that the cut-out is very authentic-looking, and that there is nothing about it which would obviously give away the fact that it is a cardboard cut-out—it does not depict Madonna in an outrageous costume that she wouldn't plausibly wear on a normal street, for example. The agent's belief is thus justified. Finally, we make the scenario such that the belief is true. In this case, for instance, all we need to do is stipulate that, as it happens, Madonna *is* across the street, doing some window-shopping out of view of our agent. *Voilà*, we have constructed our very own Gettier case!

Responding to the Gettier Problem

There is no easy way to respond to the Gettier cases, and since Gettier's article back in 1963, a plethora of different theories of knowledge have been developed in order to offer an account of knowledge that is Gettier-proof. Initially, it was thought that all one needed to do to deal with these cases is simply tweak the classical account of knowledge. For instance, one proposal was that in order to have knowledge, one's true belief must be justified and also not in any way based on false presuppositions, such as, in the case of John just described, the false presupposition that the clock is working and not stopped. There is a pretty devastating problem with this sort of proposal, however, which is that it is difficult to spell out this idea of a 'presupposition' such that it is strong enough to deal with Gettier cases and yet not so strong that it prevents us from having most of the knowledge that we think we have.

For example, suppose that John has a sister across town—let's call her Sally—who is in fact at this moment finding out what the time is by looking at a working clock. Intuitively, Sally *does* gain knowledge of what the time is by looking at the time on the clock. Notice, however, that Sally may believe all sorts of other related propositions, some of which may be false—for example, she may believe that the clock is regularly maintained, when in fact no one is taking care of it. Is this belief a presupposition of her belief in what the time is? If it is (i.e., if we understand the

notion of a ‘presupposition’ liberally) then this false presupposition will prevent her from having knowledge of the time, even though we would normally think that looking at a reliable working clock is a great way of coming to know what the time is.

Alternatively, suppose we understand the notion of a ‘presupposition’ in a more restrictive way such that this belief isn’t a presupposition of Sally’s belief in the time. The problem now is to explain why John’s false belief that he’s looking at a working clock counts as a presupposition of his belief in the time (and so prevents him from counting as knowing what the time is) if Sally’s false belief that the clock is regularly maintained is not also treated as a presupposition. Why don’t they *both* lack knowledge of what the time is?

If this problem weren’t bad enough, there is also a second objection to this line of response to the Gettier cases, which is that it is not clear that the agent in a Gettier case need presuppose *anything* at all. Consider a different Gettier case in this regard, due to Chisholm. In this example, we have a farmer—let’s call her Gayle—who forms her belief that there is a sheep in the field by looking at a shaggy dog, which happens to look just like a sheep. As it turns out, however, there is a sheep in the field (standing behind the dog), and hence Gayle’s belief is true. Moreover, her belief is also justified because she has great evidence for thinking that there is a sheep in the field (she can see what looks to be a sheep in the field, for example).

Given the immediacy of Gayle’s belief in this case, however, it is hard to see that it really presupposes any further beliefs at all, at least unless we are to understand the notion of a presupposition *very* liberally. And notice that if we do understand the notion of a presupposition so liberally that Gayle counts as illicitly making a presupposition, the problem then re-emerges of how to account for apparently genuine cases of knowledge, such as that intuitively possessed by Sally.

The dilemma for proponents of this sort of response to the Gettier cases is thus to explain how we should understand the notion of a presupposition broadly enough so that it applies to the Gettier cases while at the same time understanding it narrowly enough so that it doesn’t apply to other non-Gettier cases in which, intuitively, we would regard the agent concerned as having knowledge. In short, we want a response to the problem, which explains why John lacks knowledge in such a way that it doesn’t thereby deprive Sally of knowledge.

Once it was recognised that there was no easy answer to the problem posed to the classical account of knowledge by the Gettier cases, the race was on to find a radically new way of analysing knowledge which was Gettier-proof. One feature that all such accounts share is that they understand the conditions for knowledge such that they demand more in the way of co-operation from the world than simply that the belief in question is true. That is, on the classical account of knowledge there is one condition which relates to the world—the truth condition—and two conditions that relate to us as agents—the belief and justification conditions. These last two conditions, at least as they are usually understood in any case, don’t demand anything from the world in the sense that they could obtain regardless of how the world is. If I were the victim of an hallucination, for example, then I might have a whole range of wholly deceptive experiences, experiences that, nonetheless, lead me to believe something and, moreover, to justifiably believe it. (For example, if I seem to see that, say, there is a glass in front of me, then this is surely a good, and thus justifying, reason for believing that there is a glass in front of me, even if the appearance of the glass is an illusion.) The moral of the Gettier cases is, however, that you need to demand more from the world than simply that one’s justified belief is true if you are to have knowledge.

In the stopped-clock Gettier case, for example, the problem came about because, although John had excellent grounds for believing what he did, it nevertheless remained that he did not know what he believed because of some oddity in the world—in this case that the normally reliable clock had not only stopped but had stopped in such a way that John still formed a true belief. It thus appears that we need an account of knowledge, which imposes a further requirement on the world over and above the truth of the target belief—that, for example, the

agent is, *in fact*, forming his belief in the right kind of way. But specifying exactly what this requirement involves is far from easy.

Radical Scepticism

As it is usually understood in the contemporary debate, radical scepticism is not supposed to be thought of as a philosophical position (i.e., as a stance that someone adopts) as such, but rather it is meant as a challenge which any theorist of knowledge must overcome. That is, radical scepticism is meant to serve a *methodological* function. The goal is to show that one's theory of knowledge is scepticism-proof, since if it isn't—if it allows that most knowledge is impossible—then there must be something seriously wrong with the view. Accordingly we are not to think of the 'sceptic' as a person—as someone who is trying to convince us of anything—but rather as our intellectual conscience which is posing a specific kind of problem for our epistemological position in order to tease out what our view really involves and whether it is a plausible stance to take.

There are two main components to sceptical arguments, as they are usually understood in the contemporary discussion of this topic. The first component concerns what is known as a **sceptical hypothesis**. A sceptical hypothesis is a scenario in which you are radically deceived about the world and yet your experience of the world is exactly as it would be if you were not radically deceived. Consider, for example, the fate of the protagonist in the film *The Matrix*, who comes to realise that his previous experiences of the world were in fact being 'fed' into his brain whilst his body was confined to a large vat. Accordingly, whilst he seemed to be experiencing a world rich with interaction between himself and other people, in fact he was not interacting with anybody or any *thing* at all (at least over and above the tubes in the vat that were 'feeding' him his experiences), but was instead simply floating motionlessly. Call this the *brain in a vat* sceptical hypothesis.

The problem posed by sceptical hypotheses is that we seem unable to know that they are false. After all, if our experience of the world could be exactly as it is and yet we are the victims of a sceptical hypothesis, then on what basis could we ever hope to distinguish a genuine experience of the world from an illusory one? How could know that one is not a brain in a vat, given that one can't possibly tell the difference between the experiences one would have in the vat and the experiences one would have if everything were perfectly normal? The first key claim of the sceptical argument is thus that we are unable to know that we are not the victims of sceptical hypotheses.

The second component of the sceptical argument involves the claim that if we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, it follows that we are unable to know very much at all. Right now, for example, I think that I know that I am sitting here at my desk writing this chapter. Given that I do not know that I am not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, however, and given that if I were the victim of a sceptical hypothesis the world would appear exactly the same as it is just now even though I am *not* presently sitting at my desk, then how can I possibly know that I am sitting at my desk? The problem is that, so long as I cannot rule out sceptical hypotheses, I don't seem able to know very much at all.

We can roughly express this sceptical argument in the following way:

- P1. We are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses.
- P2. If we are unable to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, then we are unable to know anything of substance about the world.
- C. Hence, we are unable to know anything of substance about the world.

Two very plausible claims about our knowledge can thus be used to generate a cogent argument which produces this rather devastating radically sceptical conclusion. In this sense, the sceptical

argument is a paradox—i.e., a series of apparently intuitive premises, which entail an absurd, and thus *counter-intuitive*, conclusion.

We've already noted the strong support that the first premise has, in that it does seem that one couldn't possibly know that one was not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis, such as the brain in a vat hypothesis. One might thus think that the weakest link in this argument must be the second premise.

Here is one basis on which one might dispute the second premise. Doesn't it look too demanding? That is, doesn't it ask far too much of a knower that she be able to rule out radical sceptical hypotheses if she has to have widespread knowledge of the world around her? Why should it be, for example, that in order to be properly said to know that I am sitting at my desk right now I must first be able to rule out the possibility that I am not a brain in a vat being 'fed' my experiences by futuristic supercomputers that are out to deceive me? Surely all that I need to do in order to have knowledge in this case is to form my belief in the right kind of way and for that belief to be supported by the appropriate evidence (e.g., that I can see my desk before me). To demand more than this seems perverse, and if scepticism merely reflects unduly restrictive epistemic standards then it isn't nearly as problematic as it might at first seem. We can reject *perverse* epistemic standards with impunity—it is only the *intuitively correct ones* that we need to pay serious attention to.

But this is too quick, for notice that it can't be true both that I am sitting here at my desk and that I am a brain in a vat (since brains in a vat do not 'sit' anywhere). Thus, if I know that I am sitting down at my desk then it seems I must also be able to know that I'm not a brain in a vat. After all, I know that if I am sitting down at my desk then I can't be a brain in a vat, and supposedly I do know that I am sitting down at my desk. So surely I must be able to know that I am not a brain in a vat too, right? (Consider the following parallel argument. One can either be sitting down or standing up, one can't do both. So if one knows that one is sitting down, then surely one can thereby know that one is not standing up, since one knows that one's sitting down excludes the possibility that one is standing up).

Of course the problem with all of this is we've already granted to the sceptic, in the first premise, that we can't know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that one is a brain in a vat. It follows that if having knowledge of something so mundane as that one is seated at one's desk entails that one knows that one is not a brain in a vat, then one can't possibly have this mundane knowledge after all. So we are back with our original problem of explaining which of two premises that make up this argument is false.

The problem of radical scepticism therefore seems to turn on very plausible claims which are hard to deny, and this means that responding to this problem is easier said than done. So not only is it difficult to explain what knowledge is (on account of the Gettier problem), but it is also difficult to demonstrate that we have much of the knowledge that we take ourselves to have (on account of the problem of radical scepticism). In this chapter we have thus witnessed, at least in broad outline, two of the most important problems of contemporary epistemology.

Chapter Summary

- Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. One of the characteristic questions of epistemology concerns what all the myriad kinds of knowledge we ascribe to ourselves have in common: *What is knowledge?*
- We can distinguish between knowledge of propositions, or *propositional knowledge*, and know-how, or *ability knowledge*. Intuitively, the former demands a greater degree of intellectual sophistication on the part of the knower than the latter.
- In order to have knowledge of a proposition, that proposition must be true, and one must believe it.

- Mere true belief does not suffice for knowledge, however, since one can gain mere true belief purely by luck, and yet you cannot gain knowledge purely by luck.
- According to the *classical account of knowledge*, knowledge is understood as justified true belief, where a justification for one's belief consists of good reasons for thinking that the belief in question is true.
- *Gettier cases* are cases in which one forms a true justified belief and yet lacks knowledge because the truth of the belief is largely a matter of luck. (The example we gave of this was that of someone forming a true belief about what the time is by looking at a stopped clock, which just so happens to be displaying the right time.) Gettier cases show that the classical account of knowledge in terms of justified true belief is unsustainable.
- There is no easy answer to the Gettier cases; no simple way of supplementing the classical account of knowledge so that it can deal with these cases. Instead, a radically new way of understanding knowledge is required, one that demands greater co-operation on the part of the world than simply that the belief in question be true.
- *Radical scepticism* is the view that it is impossible to know very much. We are not interested in the view because anyone positively defends it as a serious position, but rather because examining the sorts of considerations that can be put forward in favour of radical scepticism helps us to think about what knowledge is.
- One dominant type of sceptical argument appeals to what is known as a *sceptical hypothesis*. This is a scenario, which is indistinguishable from normal life but in which one is radically deceived (e.g., possibility that one is a disembodied brain floating in a vat of nutrients being 'fed' one's experiences by supercomputers).
- Using sceptical hypotheses, the sceptic can reason in the following way. I'm unable to know that I'm not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis (since such a scenario is indistinguishable from normal life), and thus it follows that I can't know any of the propositions that I think I know which are inconsistent with sceptical hypotheses (e.g., that I'm presently sitting writing this chapter).

Study Questions

1. Explain, in your own words, what the difference between ability knowledge and propositional knowledge is, and give two examples of each.
2. What does it mean to say that knowledge requires true belief, and why do epistemologists claim that this the case?
3. Why is mere true belief not sufficient for knowledge? Give an example of your own of a case in which an agent truly believes something, but does not know it.
4. What is the classical account of knowledge? How does the classical account of knowledge explain why a lucky true belief doesn't count as knowledge?
5. What is a Gettier case, and what do such cases show? Try to formulate a Gettier case of your own.
6. In what way might it be said that the problem with Gettier cases is that they involve a justified true belief which is based on a false presupposition? Explain, with an example, why one cannot straightforwardly deal with the Gettier cases by advancing a theory of knowledge which demands justified true belief that does not rest on any false presuppositions.
7. What is a sceptical hypothesis, and what role does it play in sceptical arguments? Try to formulate a sceptical hypothesis of your own and use it as part of a radical sceptical argument.

Introductory Further Reading

- Greco, J. (2007) 'External World Skepticism', *Philosophy Compass*, Oxford: Blackwell. [A sophisticated, yet still accessible, survey of the main issues as regards scepticism of the variety that concerns us in this chapter].
- Luper, S. (2010) 'Cartesian Skepticism', *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, S. Bernecker & D. H. Pritchard (eds), London: Routledge. [An authoritative and completely up-to-date survey of the kind of scepticism that is of interest to us in this chapter].
- Pritchard, D. (2013) *What is this Thing Called Knowledge?*, 3rd edn., London: Routledge. [See parts one and four for a fuller, but still accessible, discussion of the nature of knowledge and the problem of radical scepticism].
- Steup, M., Turri, J., & Sosa, E. (eds) (2013) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Blackwell. [This volume contains a number of sections that would be relevant to the topics covered in this chapter. See especially the exchange between Jonathan Vogel and Richard Fumerton on scepticism (§5), and the exchange between Duncan Pritchard and Stephen Hetherington on whether there can be lucky knowledge (§7)].

Advanced Further Reading

- Hetherington, S. (2010) 'The Gettier Problem', *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, S. Bernecker & D. H. Pritchard (eds.), chapter 12, London: Routledge. [A very useful and up-to-date survey of the main issues raised by Gettier-style examples].
- Pritchard, D. (2009) *Knowledge*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [This is an advanced textbook in epistemology. Chapters 1-4 offer a critical overview of some of the main analyses of knowledge in the contemporary literature; chapter 6 presents the main themes in the contemporary debate regarding radical scepticism].
- Shope, R. K. (2002) 'Conditions and Analyses of Knowing', *The Oxford Handbook to Epistemology*, P. K. Moser (ed.), pp. 25–70, Oxford: Oxford University Press. [A comprehensive treatment of the problem posed by Gettier cases and the various contemporary responses to that problem in the literature. The discussion that starts on page 29 is most relevant to this chapter. Note that as this chapter develops it becomes increasingly more demanding].
- Zagzebski, L. (1999) 'What is Knowledge?' *The Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, J. Greco & E. Sosa, (eds) pp. 92–116, Oxford: Blackwell. [A very thorough overview of the issues surrounding the project of defining knowledge, especially in the light of the Gettier cases].

Internet Resources

- Gettier, E. (1963) 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis* 23, 121–3 Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.ditext.com/gettier/gettier.html>. [The article which started the contemporary debate about how best to define knowledge and which contains, by definition, the first official Gettier cases].
- Hetherington, S. (2005) 'Gettier Problems', *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, B. Dowden & J. Fieser (eds), Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/g/gettier.htm>. [An excellent overview of the Gettier problem, and the main responses to it, by one of the leading epistemologists].
- Ichikawa, J., & Steup, M. (2012) 'The Analysis of Knowledge', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Online. Available HTTP: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/>. [An excellent and comprehensive overview of the issues regarding the project of defining knowledge].
- Klein, P. (2010) 'Skepticism', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Online. Available HTTP: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>. [A superb overview of the literature on scepticism, written by one of the world's foremost epistemologists].
- Pritchard, D. (2002) 'Skepticism, Contemporary', *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Online. Available HTTP:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/skepcont.htm>. [An accessible introduction to the literature on scepticism].

Truncellito, D. (2007) 'Epistemology', *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (eds.) B. Dowden & J. Fieser, Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/e/epistemo.htm>. [Read up to the end of §2.b for more on the basic requirements for knowledge].